DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 965 CS 205 314

AUTHOR Lloyd-Jones, Richard
TITLE Who Am I Unless I Know You? Another View of Competence.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature (University, AL, October 18-20, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Competence; *Composition (Literary); Educational Philosophy; *Educational Theories; Individual Development; *Language; Language Development; *Testing Problems; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The most important competence in using language is not to be discovered in the anatomy of isolated features but in the holistic view of writing and speaking in context. Three general views of education can be summarized as defining the learner as willfully ignorant, needing to be whipped into shape; as a blank tablet or empty jug, waiting to be filled with knowledge; or as malleable material, waiting to be changed, developed, enlarged by knowledge into another creature. Probably the favorite theory of our age is the last view, called "developmental." The awareness of a relationship between a writer and a reader is essential to writing with any degree of literacy. Writers should also be simultaneously aware of both writing as it represents content and writing as a thing-in-itself, a system of symbols and signs. Standardized tests of writing competency tend to eliminate the purpose for writing, the stance of the writer, and the specific issues to be addressed, so test results are sterile and often misleading. (AEA)

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# WHO AM I UNLESS I KNOW YOU? ANOTHER VIEW OF COMPETENCE

Richard Lloyd-Jones

Mystery lives in Language. Any view of human competence which does not begin with this assumption is more dangerous than useful because it encourages a reductive view of the nature of man. Language permits us to know ourselves and thou as well as you and it; it governs the realm of the spirit where relations are named and through which one comes to know that which cannot be named. Whenever our enthusiasm for making tests entices us to separate some formal feature of language so that it can be encapsulated in an "item," then we have engaged a "structure," as Buber calls it, but we have not demonstrated a human competence to enter into relationships. Whether we offer multiple choices of verb tense or count the number of examples used to substantiate an assertion, we have in a sense sold our birthright for a mess of potage. By all means let us honor a good bowl of soup, but let us not define ourselves wholly in terms of "it."

Having begun in such grand terms, perhaps I should take a lower path through some standard rhetorical definitions. Even mysteries can be discussed in part in the plain style. The functions of language can be named as serving two objectives. The first is to make the world, and the second is to allow one user to relate to another and by that act to make one's self. We can instead divide these functions into explanation, persuasion, and expression, or into logic and communication, or expressive and transactional discourse, or even, I suppose, into Bain's four modes, if a function can be made into a mode. In the world of daily utility one might even talk separately of the purposes of progress reports, sales brochures, term papers, letters of sympathy, and the like. These little purposes are a help to teachers on Monday morning. They set up situations for discourse as it is demonstrated in assignments.

There are advantages in thinking grandly about the purposes of language, though, in order to avoid being trivialized by pressures of brute survival. Some people may argue that the world exists (at least in the mind of God) and thus cannot be made, but for each person the world needs to be made anew in small pieces so that ordinary mortals can live in it. The almost helpless infant must become strong in many ways if it is to be human, but whether we say that it develops myriad synapses, or learns to control abstractions, or masters a symbol system, we are observing that this creature finds a language to organize one organism's perceptions into a world of meaning. Quite possibly the personally discovered structures also do exist in the world, but the infant must discover them in the forms permitted by language. We are delighted with the first word and impressed with how soon words are made into whole sentences because we recognize the astonishing multiplication of human power that is taking place. We repeat the words and applaud; we patiently offer alternatives to the child's mislabeling of all males as "papa" or cats as "dogs" and know that the child is growing into our language system and our view of the world. Language is our chief vehicle for exploration, and we share it with those dear to us.

In Babel we know that languages divide us, but we sometimes forget that part of the trouble is that separate languages create separate visions of the world. In hope we speak of the United Nations, but the approximations of translators should not really deceive us, for we know that children born

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into different language cultures not only acquire different values but organize the world differently. Objects have different emotional coding, and levels of abstraction and classifications differ according to the need of a culture. Sometimes we contemplate the problems of misunderstanding, like the stories of the end of the Pacific phase of World War Two, where we are told a mistranslated passage led to the dropping of the Bomb and the entry of the Soviets into that part of the war, but any of us who deal in literary texts are constantly caught up by problems of taking the language of one culture and presenting it fairly in another. We are amused to hear that Shakespeare is a German author, and not a French one, but if we are clever, we know he is an alien even to modern Americans, few of whom are really comfortable in Jacobean English. We master the world in language, but it is not the same world mastered by those born to other languages. If we ever master those worlds, it is because we have made ourselves into suitable audiences for the original language.

Consider even more what happens when we abandon natural language and write in mathematics or graphics. In a way numbers are international and timeless by virtue of reduction; we cut away the sensory referents which might confuse our emotions with concrete emblems of value, but the act of cutting out much of what the natural language can say and must say also rearranges the world. Natural language represents the blend of naming and valuing which is characteristically human. The abstractions of mathematics de-nature as much as they de-nationalize and modern physical scientists are alienated from colleagues in the humanities until they learn to translate numbers into words, and for all of the defensive talk about two cultures, the fault does not really lie with the humanist. Some scientists find such an act of translation a useful check on a theory; others find such "simplifications" offensive to their sense of truth to the mathematical idea. Introducing physical objects toward which we inevitably have feelings contradicts the whole system of abstract symbols, even though it also may serve to correct some wild errors. I sympathize with both sides in the argument, and here I have no need to choose one, although in truth I think we have to live in the world of sensations. I merely want to observe that a command of more than one language--natural or invented--allows one to have the world in more than one way. And that is power. The issue is not so much to correct error as it is to conceive of choices in representing the world according to one's need. The choice of what language to use in itself limits the available answers to questions.

My concern in this paper, however, is not with how language controls knowledge, the external world of sensation, but how it controls people conceived separately from the world of objects. The distinction I'm grasping for is analogous to disclaimers made by women when they object to being treated as sex objects instead of as people. They are not denying sexuality, and perhaps not even their status as objects in a world of sensation, but they are insisting that some quality of human animation is more important in defining their nature than the facts of their physical bodies. I am concerned with how the linguistic relationship between speaker and hearer, writer and reader, defines and transcends both. Language and what it denotes provide the context and the representation of the relationship. The most important competence in using the language is not to be discovered in the anatomy of isolated features but in the holistic view of writing and speaking in context.

The competence I'm talking about is acquired by living actively among people. Like the language itself social competence is primarily manifested in present oral situations, but it is subject to conscious control in relatively timeless written relationships. In speech it is augmented by gesture and physical presence. In writing the temporal sequence of speech becomes verbal architecture in a page layout. For a reader can observe a beginning and an ending of a paper simultaneously--or nearly so. At least the eye can move back and forth as in examining an object. The "shape of a discourse" has almost literal meaning. In short, the techniques of social awareness are generally learned in speech and translated into writing, an act which requires additional self-awareness and labor, and thus is reserved for major occasions.

It is helpful to see this process within a general view of education. One view of education defines the human as willfully ignorant, manifesting disobedience in finding wrong answers--or least in failing to learn or recall right answers. Such a theory requires clearly accepted right answers--genuine doubt is not allowed--but even more it defines the child as an inadequate adult who can literally be whipped into shape. I suppose that at least some of the people in this era who talk of negative reinforcement really share these assumptions. The beast in man, the infantile tantrum throwers who think the world has made to serve them, must learn to submit, and even the developmentalists may admit that there is a stage of growth during which these assumptions about punishment have merit. Avoidance of personal discomfort may influence the behavior of children who cannot yet imagine "social good," or "deferred pleasure."

We might instead adopt the blank tablet or empty jug view of education. Here is clay ready to be shaped or wax to be incised by teachers. Perhaps the vessel can be expanded, like a balloon, but essentially the duty of educators is not to change the nature of the jug--indeed perhaps they cannot change its nature--but rather to supply knowledge and skills as facts to fill the space. Sherlock Holmes told Watson that the mind is an attic which should not be filled with unessential knowledge because no room will be left for what is important. In this world of blank tablets one discovers facts; creation is an anomaly. I take it that this view of education once dominated our schools and perhaps still dominates our colleges. It is lecture and textbook land; the fact is an end in itself. Such a view permits us to believe that students are readily tested <u>en masse</u>, so it is popular for wrong reasons, but that should not obscure the truth that knowledge is useful. We need facts even though we are not jugs.

Probably the favorite theory of our age is "developmental." The word decorates all sorts of course titles and sometimes serves as a euphemism for what should have been learned at an earlier time in one's life, but we need not rule it out simply because it is fashionable. I think I hear the same principle enunciated in those Romantic paeons to the imagination in the 19th century paradigms. Lord Kelvin may have though that science dealt with the measurable, and that things which could not be measured were not science, and perhaps didn't exist, but evolution, genetic theory, even physics itself were headed in other directions. The establishment of kindergartens, the theories of Piaget, variations on organic and biological metaphors, the developments of hierarchies of values all suggest that humans not merely

acquire knowledge but also are changed, developed, enlarged by that knowledge into different creatures. We <u>are</u> both what we eat and what we learn. That is what we mean by growth and we can emblemize it in the differences between modern photographic portraits of children as developing humans in contrast with older paintings of children as under-sized adults. Indeed even our efforts to define syntactic maturity can be read in these terms. The more complex the syntax, the more we assume the human bud is turning into a flower.

A developmental theory is useful for a rhetorician in terms we can identify with Dewey. Experience for Dewey is more than the accumulation of events to fill the empty vessel of a life; it is an active engagement with the events. The exercise of the engagement shapes the mind as work on the muscles develops the body. But exercise is not merely repetition, it is incremental. We can borrow another useful term from mathematics--"successive approximation" or its less sophisticated cousin--"trial-and-error." By implication, in each experience of a process mistakes are not willful--they are merely the accidental result of inexperienced aim or they are the test firings in the systematic observation of tracer bullets. The child tries a word; the parent offers a better one. The pupil drafts a paper; the teacher-editor suggests improvements. Some have complained that the teacher is thus always cast in the negative role of correcter and the pupil is always demonstrated as inadequate, and that is a half-truth. It should apply equally to the parent, but we don't think of parents as negative because the correction is supported by affection. The half truth reveals an implied attitude toward error, a vestige of the notion that error is disobedience, so of course any suggestion for change implies a negative statement about the moral value of errant person. The mistake is an absolute wrong, not a step in a process of discovery. The other half of the truth is that the correcter is a partner in a search. If one is engaged with the pupil in combining the experience of two people to produce an effective statement, then the "correction" is a product of mutual interest, of a social bond, and affirms support. "Together <u>we</u> will find <u>your</u> meaning." This alliance is built on affection, though it may be strained if the teacher faces 120 pupils a day.

More, the product of the common seeking for effective statements is not merely overt abstracted knowledge of a schoolroom type, nor even tacit skill, but an latered capacity to do the task. The metaphor of the <u>tabula rasa</u> suggests a fixed size, a limited space on which to record knowledge; the developmental metaphors suggest that exercise and nutrition through practice and experiment enable us to handle additional kinds of knowledge.

It is in this developmental sense that the changes in social maturity must be seen. The infant is totally self centered; it engages in transactions in order to get service--food and comfort--and it submits to force, but it doesn't imagine the motives of others. Discussions of the pre-school child abound with descriptions of how children move from an awareness of outsiders as things to be smiled at, adapted to, and played with to a sense that other sentient creatures should be understood. "How would you like it if Billy did X to you?" Thus we lead children to discover analogs of themselves. Although our purpose is probably to change the immediate behavior of the child toward another person, the effect is to insist on the essential similarity of people and to call attention to the child's

self by comparing it with another self.

In seeing the analog, the alter ego, this not-I, children can no longer take themselves for granted. The message is that the world does not cease to exist when you close your eyes at bedtime, Mommy really is there when she hides beyond the towel and then looks out saying "peekaboo." These almost changeless games are part of the process of turning the new human from a solipsist into a lap-or porch-child and then into a citizen of the world. At any stage the process may be delayed or totally inhibited and we may find ourself with a physical adult who is a moral and social infant.

Our expectations about maturity are modest enough. Those who can extend their social imagination to encompass the family and a few close friends win gold stars as responsible citizens; so far, we have not really demanded great humanitarian gestures of adults; although we praise minor altruists as great benefactors, we prefer to assassinate the genuine moral lawgivers. They develop too far ahead of the crowd, and we can't see ourselves being analogized in them. We are threatened by their power to upset conventions more than we are bothered by childish vandals who write on walls. To be sure, once they are safely dead, one may promise to imitate, as in the imitations of Christ, but no one is really expected to measure up to the great social discoverers. We are not able to discover ourselves in such people except as projections of fantasy.

In short, in social development most people prefer to stick to their own neighborhood. If one is obliged to examine the motives and creeds of people who are too far estranged from us or if we must meet too many strangers, we have to make so many comparisons that we can't keep them straight. A good Athenian might not have imagined so many ways to "know thyself." After all, Sparta really was in the neighborhood, and variant choices in discourse with Spartans were not great. The author of the Republic must even have liked Spartans. But one of the chief functions of discourse in an electronic world, in a world with writing, tape, and film, is to enlarge the audience far beyond the variety represented in the Greek world and thus to force more refined definitions of the self. Writing exists in this larger framework of discourse and premature efforts to judge competence on the basis of mechanical forms are misleading. The form out of context has meaning only in a crude sense.

If we are to know about skill in writing, we need first to judge the competence of the writer in recognizing who the writer and the reader are within any specific situation. The relationship is at stake; apart from the relationship, neither exists in discourse. Lewis Thomas' metaphor of the Medusa and the Snail is perfect for my emblem. In the gyre which represents their continued existence first one and then the other seems to dominate, to be the survivor, but in truth neither organism can continue to exist without the other. To be sure, their knowledge of one another is truly carnal, and they are not alter egos, but still the identity of one without the other is an illusion. One literally feeds off the other.

The flights of metaphors may obscure the humble reality. Children described by Britton and others first use language to grasp the world in the language used by those who tend them; their talk is designed to validate a view of the world. Gradually the children learn rules for varying the rules

so as to express their own perceptions and needs to adults and thus engage them in transactions. Since the adults are willing and often able to make the whole effort at interpretation, children need adapt but little except to explain issues the adults cannot otherwise intuit. The more strangers enter the children's worlds, the greater these children need to imagine what listeners actually hear and thus frame their discourse to fit the needs of another person. The shyness of children must surely be in part a reaction to the awareness of such alienation from other creatures, the appreciation that differing wills must be coped with. By school time the sense of otherness develops rapidly, in face-to-face meetings, although report cards still have places to record additional progress in deportment--the school name for social respect. And even adults do not fully master the issues. Consider how many of us who lecture, even though we are worldly, have trouble deciding whether what we frame so artfully is even understood by our audience. We won't ask whether some of our best classes for the students are those which are messy with loose ends and offensive to our sense of art.

By the time children have become basically social they can then focus on the bare mechanics of getting oral discourse translated into marks on the page and, eventually, can learn to produce what is truly written discourse. Once again the adults read past the handwriting and spelling to guess at what the child wants to say, and children are too busy with the physical acts of calligraphy to worry much about audiences. Anyway knowledge of audiences in oral situations is largely tacit, and writing invites conscious control. Still, in strange ways the written words are external to the writer, like a person, and thus written language is separate from the children who write. The pleasure of the children in reading last week's writing suggests the degree to which the written experience has grown apart, a thing written by someone else despite whatever claims are made for pride of authorship. The older child thus experiences growth and can be analytic about the self that was. Perhaps revision is too much to ask, but Donald Graves is engaged in detailed studies strongly suggesting that revision is an important part of writing of second graders--providing adults know how to look for it. Even without instruction in revision, the trial and error mechanism of successive approximation takes over. The children grow and develop as they discover how to get out of themselves and into language.

Our real reason, then, for being concerned with literacy is not the sort of competence measured in tests of usage and mechanics, nor even in tests of reading and writing as they are manifested in notes to the repairman or in employment agency forms. We ought to be concerned about literacy in the sense that written language represents our conscious and most refined efforts to say to other people who we are in relation to what we know. Reductionist rationalizations which are preoccupied with the mechanical sub-skills on the grounds that "you have to start somewhere" or "a journey of a thousand miles has to begin with one step" encourage us to accept our slots in a mechanistic world, to keep our places.

Let me divert your attention for a moment to another use of "literacy" as it is embedded in the word "literate." We hear in that second word no subliminal suggestion of "minimum." Literate people are those who are well read, cultivated, urbane. These people are probably full of knowledge in general, but even more they have large views of the world, are able to imagine many kinds of mind, have at hand many plots and elaborations of plots into which they can fit experience. The old image of the education

of literate leaders probably included a year of travel on the continent; I recall Americans in less affluent classes suggesting that a hitch in the military would help young men not merely shape up but discover other kinds of men and thus fit themselves better to be part of the world of affairs. I haven't heard much of that justification in the current political climate. We are retreating into insularity. Now in my part of rural America I don't even hear as often that youth should run off to the city in order to grow up. I interpret these prescriptions in whatever form, though, as suggestions that growth requires additional perspectives on one's world, an awareness of what other people are and have been. A text provides information, but information shaped by the purposes of a human will. As we study the mind revealed in the text, we are engaged primarily in discovering the other person in the only way it is accessible to us--in language. Touching is fine, but limited. Even watching does not make sense until the vision is transformed into signs and symbols, systems and categories. The language in its context gives the meaning to touching and seeing just as they in turn give meaning to language. We need the ultimate refinements of literary language to represent most fully the mind in front of us. In this statement I am not referring merely to poetry or fiction or drama, but to any form of the language in which the full implication of value is emphasized. I suppose I might even stretch so far as to include that "objective" discourse in which the writer makes a great issue of being self-effacing. To declare oneself "transparent" and to deny any evidence of one's own values is a remarkable form of linguistic artistry, and is itself a declaration of value, but it should not be confused with the wooden conventional textbook formulae any more than the bushels of Elizabethan sonnets gathered by Sir Sidney Lee should be confused with those of Shakespeare.

How does one cope with literacy of this kind? I have quite traditional answers. In all discourse, but especially literary discourse, writers should be simultaneously aware of writing as it represents a content and writing as a thing-in-itself, a system of symbols and signs. A student of writing should always be asked to observe the translucence of the verbal surface, for in that surface is the signal to stand back from the content itself in order to contemplate the situation in which the language exists. Simply, that reminds us to inquire who is sharing language for what reason. We are made into observers as well as participants. The most obvious examples are in literary language. In the end literary language, however conventional or gaudy it may on occasion be, is always anti-reductive, is always exhibiting human value. For that reason the study of how literary language works is always going to challenge us to deal with the essential competency in language, the one which deals with human relationships.

To be sure, when we meet most of the students in most of our classes we cannot expect literary masterpieces. Our theories of development suggest that if we pose literary problems we will get no more than approximations of literature, but we will engage the student in real choices among the features of language. Still, for most students literary efforts may be overwhelming. Quite likely most of our effort should be spent with writing which defines rather explicitly a scene in which writer and reader act--perhaps quite ordinary transactions of daily existence, for such moments define us all. Even in commonplace activities we shift from direct representations of reality to highly abstract categorizations of reality, and back, and so explore how language defines people.

Now I am back where I began. Until you enter my scene I am undifferentiated as the maker of the world I see. When I oblige myself to talk to you, to imagine who you are and what your world is, then I begin to define myself by finding how we compare and by adjusting to differences. Where are we truly analogues? What is the idea or act that separates us and marks that my position is not-yours? The language we share is not quite common property. Its features are enough alike that we recognize meaning in them; they are enough different that each of us must be cautious in interpreting what the other says. I try to guess where our language is not shared and in the process I discover my bias as much as I find yours. And here are the problems of human competency which interest me and, I think, should interest us all. We are not about writing as a craft with economic value; we are describing what it means to be human.

I'm not suggesting some standardized test nor even some verbal projective therapy. Rather, I think we should concentrate on devising classroom tasks which really engage a student's commitment to an audience. Who is to care what the student says? Classmates? The teacher as person of wise experience? The teacher as gradegiver? The teacher as copy editor? Some reasonably well defined fictional character, such as a customer, a potential employer, a younger sibling, the dean, the sheriff? Just because it is hard sometimes to design a task in which a student may present real knowledge for an appropriate audience does not mean such a question is unimportant. It may mean the proposed task is irrelevant if no one could be expected to care.

When we define the audience, we also define the student. Can some legitimate role in the student's existence be imagined as a proper writer for a given audience? What does it mean to write for the boss? for a dependant? What ethical restraints are imposed? Answering such questions forces self-awareness. The answers may also imply that some subjects are inappropriate because the writer's viewpoint cannot be significant. The purpose of a given communication cannot be realized apart from the general policies of the writer, the stand such a person takes before the work, the conditions of self from which a style emerges. Yet, the policies which define a person's will cannot exist except in relation to specific issues presented to particular people. If the task is constructed without a consideration of such limits, the writing will probably be bad and instruction implied by the task will be false.

Of course, none of these strictures really can be discussed apart from language, so those who allege we ought to be offering vocabulary building, grammar, and copy editing have a chunk of a truth, but as an abstraction, language is a rarified study. Life exists in the language as it is used, so tests of language apart from uses are sterile, probably misleading. I don't doubt that such tests can discover come competency, but it may be so lifeless as to be useless. The worst part of such tests is that they divert the attention from what we really want to know.

The real problem with our preoccupation with competency expressed in quantitative terms is that the questions we ask establish the limits of useful knowledge, if you ask a foolish question, you get a foolish answer; if you ask a tricky question, you get tricks; if you ask a trivial question, you play trivia. The items are "secure," of course, so one one can really challenge the test, but we quickly learn to define our objectives only in forms which can be tested in standard ways. The theory says we define our objectives before we design the test, but practice is governed by practicability, so we accept the implied limits of the test method. Early in a testing program we may make an issue of what is not reported; we may proclaim that we are only making a predictive correlation with a point four reliability, but the brief newspaper accounts don't have room to report the qualifications, academic advisers never see the test description, and before long the discussions treat the test domain and scores as the limits of reality. So

Lord Kelvin is back. In writing that means that the relationships and contexts disappear as classroom interests. We no longer ask whether language represents us and our ideas to people we care about. I forget who I am because I deny that I need to know you. That is the tragedy of scoring too many tests.

Richard Lloyd-Jones
University of Iowa